

Managing Hearing Loss Later in Life

Hearing loss statistics and difficulties

Hearing loss affects one person out of fifteen in the general population. In adults over the age of 65, almost 50% have a hearing loss which interferes with communication. Few people are aware of the meaning of hearing loss in everyday living and of special difficulties in dealing with hearing loss and old age at the same time.

Hearing loss and aging present a double disadvantage. Hearing loss creates troubling changes in the way we communicate, and we may feel socially or psychologically disadvantaged due to the hearing loss and/or aging.

Early Diagnosis

Early diagnosis is important. Early signs are gradual and may be easily overlooked. The first step in coping involves medical examination by an otologist (ear specialist) to assess and understand the physical extent of the hearing loss. An audiologist can identify the type and degree of hearing loss and provide aural rehabilitation. Being able to live with a hearing loss goes beyond diagnosis to understanding what hearing means in our daily lives.

Coping with hearing loss

Adults trying to cope with hearing loss and old age use various strategies. One strategy is to maintain that nothing unusual has happened, "bluffing" or pretending to understand by saying "Uh-Huh" and nodding one's head when one does not understand. That prevents improved communication and may not conceal the problem.

- A more positive tactic is "being alive" or using vision and other senses to cue into the environment.
- A prior agreement strategy involves arranging for a hearing person to assist the person with a hearing loss in communication.
- Another strategy is letting people know something unusual is happening by being honest about the hearing loss and suggesting ways to others to improve communication.

Difficulties handling hearing loss

Since aging and hearing loss are sometimes viewed as negative and threatening, many people use defense mechanisms to deal with the stress.

- In denial, one acts as though a problem does not exist.
- With repression, a person selectively forgets, such as "forgetting" to put on his hearing aid.
- Rationalization, realizing the problem but using socially accepted excuses. With rationalization one may say, "Well, I found the play disappointing", when actually one could not hear most of the dialogue.

These defense mechanisms may be helpful in coping temporarily with stress, but continued use may prevent finding positive ways to manage one's hearing loss.

Exploring services in your area

Exploring services available in your area can help you cope with your hearing loss.

- Find out what services and programs are available to older persons with hearing loss and family members at a local hearing and speech center.
- Find other adults who have recently lost their hearing to share feelings, problems and provide support.
- Explore devices to help you communicate effectively. Listening, telecommunication and other devices are available.
- Get others involved. Suggest informational programs for any senior citizens group or other group with which you are involved.

Adapted from: *Managing Hearing Loss Later in Life*. National Information Center on Deafness.